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Neither playing the game nor keeping it real: Authenticity and *Big Brother*

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Sam Pepper, one of the contestants in *Big Brother 11*, at one point accused fellow housemates Josie and John James of feigning romantic feelings for each other in order to cash in on lucrative deals with celebrity magazines such as *OK!* and *Hello!*. The provocation caused much apparent offence, and led to a prolonged and predominantly rancorous debate about authenticity and inauthenticity, soon extending to revelations that other housemates (Rachel, Corinne) aimed to appear in soft pornography titles like *Nuts* and *Zoo*, and as such, 'couldn't be trusted'. The clear subtext was that any economic motivation was considered a breach of the rules of the *Big Brother* game – not the explicit parameters of the competition, but the spirit in which it should be played. Being a worthy winner is a matter of who you are rather than what you do, which raises the question of how we came to know Josie and co, as well as how we come to know celebrity selves generally. If *BB* has taught us anything about the formation of mediated selves, it is that an authentic mediated self cannot exist – and yet authenticity still matters. This piece reflects on this tension and its implications for our increasingly reflexive media culture.

The quickness of contestants and audiences to identify and condemn apparent inauthenticity is a common theme in *Big Brother*, manifest in recurring obsessions about whether contestants are 'being themselves'. In philosophical terms (Merleau-Ponty 1962, Goffman 1971 [1959]), the collective recognition of authenticity ultimately rests on the mastery of culturally specific practices; this is rarely a conscious act, but rather the internalisation of the rules governing what 'works' in a given communicative context, operating as instinct (Bourdieu 1990). Authenticity then never just is; it is something which has to be learned, and something we learn to recognise in others as pre-given, though in reality it is always a precarious construction. But even for open game-players, authenticity is a factor: while some are valorised for overtly strategising (Sam), there is also a market for those who exhibit a knowingness about how the game really works (Markham 2011), with an acceptance of the inevitability of hypocrisy (Dave, known as the 'mad monk'). The difference between the two is whether reflexivity is worn lightly or insistently, and it is the former which carries with it a distinct, viable, symbolic configuration of authenticity – and potentially authority. For each type of contestant, the 'operators' as much as the 'naturals', success as celebrities depends on fellow housemates and audiences translating their actions in a way that adds up to a coherent self.

How significant is our collective buying in to these economies of authenticity and reflexivity? In distinction to Bourdieu's concept of 'illusio' (see Williams' entry in this volume), watching *Big Brother* may involve a simple suspension of disbelief for entertainment purposes: we know about the agents and appearance fees, but either agree not to talk about it or accept it as part of the fun. However, this is not to suggest a new golden age of reflexivity on the part of reality television

contestants or viewers, nor part of a broader trend in media studies towards seeing audiences as critical and empowered (Philo 2008). In particular, attention needs to be paid to what remains obscure when audiences demonstrate relatively high levels of media literacy and awareness of industrial realities. And what tends to go unacknowledged is the collective orientation towards criteria of cultural competence which are, specifically, mediated (Hjarvard 2008). This is not a reference to the performance of pre-established character templates or narrative arcs. Rather, mediation refers to the colonisation of cultural arenas by specific logics of practice, normalised determinants of anticipating and acting that could, if adopted by audiences in other contexts, have significant ramifications. In *BB* this takes the form of recognition of identity on the basis of shared, shorthand signifiers that allow us to judge and be judged more or less spontaneously (for example, the boos routinely meted out to glamour models as they enter the house) – or even with the dedication shown by many viewers, repetitive recognition and judgement which do not require much work.

It is evident that audiences enjoy rituals of recognition and judgement – but what exactly are they recognising and judging? I would suggest that this is what *BB* has taught us most about celebrity formation and celebrity studies more broadly. In order to enter the celebrity firmament, there doesn't have to be a collective, wholesale buying into the myth that constitutes the celebrity self. A degree of reflexivity on the part of the audience is expected: we know what we're looking at when we see a Katie Price or Jade Goody tirelessly projecting their fictional identities. But while celebrity is a reflexive formation, that doesn't render the question of authenticity redundant. Instead, it's a matter of complicity between contestant and audience, the shared sense of buying into a game we know is cynical and often a little absurd. But any tabloid journalist worth their salt knows that complicity doesn't come easy – it's not a matter of attitude, but something negotiated in cold sweat (Goffman 1972, 293). The passing of *BB* comes at a time when its particular mode of celebrity formation is ascendant beyond the world of reality television, evident perhaps in the arched eyebrow of Jeremy Paxman or the ironic self-mockery of Boris Johnson. The mask can and will slip, and what it reveals is neither sheer calculation and ruthlessness nor a simple postmodern absence of identity. It is another form of self: authentic, instinctive, opportunistic, knowing – and stubbornly unreal.

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